

# Cosmetic Surgery Times

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Where the Exchange on  
Aesthetic Perspective Begins

## Testing essential for laser use on ethnic skin

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**National Report** — As cosmetic surgeons' awareness of ethnic patients' needs has grown, so has the availability of lasers and other treatments that target ethnic skin. Still, "too many people feel that certain procedures such as lasers shouldn't generally be tried on people of color," said Fran E. Cook-Bolden, M.D., director of the Ethnic Skin Specialty Group, New York.

Whether this is because of misconceptions or inexperience with such patients, she added, "it does take more time and effort to treat patients of color. When you're doing any type of laser, I preach to all practitioners: test, test, test. It's hard to generalize about what one person can tolerate based on how their skin looks. Many times in the areas that you're treating, because of postinflammatory hyperpigmentation [PIH], that actual area may be significantly darker than the normal surrounding skin. So you want to test the area that's going to be treated," or a less conspicuous one that looks similar.

To date, only the 1,320 nm Nd:YAG nonablative resurfacing laser (CoolTouch; Roseville, Calif.) has caused Dr. Cook-Bolden to soften her stance regarding the importance of skin testing. When she first

used the laser, she tested everyone but later learned that the laser was well tolerated. "If you follow the manufacturer's guidelines, you're pretty safe using that laser in all skin types," Dr. Cook-Bolden added. If you're a novice or even an expert who's never used such a laser, it's better to skin test and be safe than not test and be sorry.

Applications for the CoolTouch laser initially included smoothing fine lines and wrinkles and improving skin texture. More recently, doctors and the FDA have recognized that it also improves acne

and acne scarring. To treat ethnic patients with any of the foregoing problems, she said, "until I determine the patient's individual response to the laser, I follow manufacturers' guidelines and decrease my settings by two to four." If manufacturers recommend starting at 15 joules, for example, she starts at 13 joules or fewer.

C.L. Goh, M.D., senior consultant dermatologist, National Skin Centre, Singapore, added that when treating Asian patients with nonablative lasers for photorejuvenation, "we have to be more gentle when we increase the fluence. We cannot be too aggressive."

Depending on the laser, instead of increasing by 1 J/cm<sup>2</sup> per visit, he might try 1/2 J/cm<sup>2</sup>.

"You have to do it very gingerly to reduce the risk of PIH," he said.

Similar strictures apply when treating pigmentary disorders. Instead of the coarse skin and wrinkles that commonly afflict sun-worshipping Westerners, Dr. Goh said his patients worry more about problems including solar lentigos and melasma. He treats these conditions with intense pulsed light and lasers such as the 532nm Q-switched Nd:YAG.

As a culture, Asians favor fair, not tanned, skin. "That's why Asian people hate the sun," Dr. Goh stated. "People walk around with umbrellas. They try to avoid bright sunlight. They don't like sunbathing at all." He credited this aversion, along with Asians' natural pigment, with keeping premature aging and skin cancer rates relatively low among this population.

In all laser procedures, one must heed patients' assessments of their pain levels during treatment. In this regard, Dr. Cook-Bolden employs an ascending 10-point scale. "If I have a patient that goes above a 5, or they're consistently at 2 and jump up to 4," she said, "I stop and reevaluate my settings."

Such pain levels frequently signal that pigment is being absorbed more widely than intended. Results can include scabbing, crusts, and blistering. "In pigmented skin, you want to avoid epidermal damage," Dr. Cook-Bolden stated. "That's why longer wavelength lasers are so valuable. They bypass the epidermis and work at the levels of the collagen or other safe levels so you don't have the absorption of the melanin." **CST**

*Dr. Goh possesses no financial interests related to this article. Dr. Cook-Bolden serves as a researcher and speaker for various companies including Galderma, Skin Medica, Valiant, and Lumenis. She reports no financial interest in this article.*

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**FRAN E. COOK-BOLDEN, M.D.**



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